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**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
URGES RABIES VACCINATIONS FOR PETS**

Rabies Awareness Week is April 3-8

(RICHMOND, Va.)—The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) is reminding pet owners to make sure their animals' rabies vaccinations are up-to-date to help control rabies in Virginia.

Rabies is caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system, and is almost always fatal once symptoms develop. The rabies virus is found primarily in the saliva and brain tissue of rabid animals. The virus is most often transmitted through a bite, but can be transmitted when a rabid animal's saliva or brain tissue contacts a person's eye or mouth. Rabies vaccinations can prevent rabies in dogs, cats, ferrets and some livestock. However, there are no licensed rabies vaccines available for wild and exotic animals.

"The best way to prevent rabies is to make sure your pets are vaccinated against the disease," said State Health Commissioner Robert Stroube, M.D., M.P.H. "It is also important to avoid contact with wildlife and unknown cats and dogs."

If an animal bites you, wash the wound immediately. Call your physician, local health department or animal control agency immediately. Likewise, if a wild animal bites your pet, contact your veterinarian or local health department immediately.

To help educate Virginia's children about rabies, VDH collaborated with the Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Veterinary Medical Association to develop and distribute a "Stay Away From Strays" rabies awareness educational packet to each of the state's public elementary schools. The packet includes a rabies question and answer section and rabies vocabulary words, and is designed to complement the health education Standards of Learning material for fourth graders. Students completing the Stay Away From Strays program will have a better understanding of rabies and how to prevent it.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), rabies kills more than 50,000 people and millions of animals around the world each year. In Virginia, there were a total of 495 confirmed animal rabies cases in 2005, compared to 474 in 2004. The majority of rabies cases reported in Virginia occur in raccoons.

Successful vaccination programs that began in the 1940s led to a decline in dog rabies cases in the United States. In 1955, about 4,000 domestic animals were reported with rabies compared with 500 domestic animals in 2004. In Virginia, all dogs and cats four months of age or older must be vaccinated against rabies and are required to have proof of an up-to-date vaccination to receive a license tag.

(more)

VDH recommends the following to help control rabies:

- Vaccinate all cats, dogs and ferrets against rabies and keep the vaccinations up-to-date.
- Avoid contact with wild animals and stray cats and dogs.
- Do not feed wild animals or stray cats and dogs.
- Report stray animals to your local animal control agency.
- Eliminate outdoor food sources around the home.
- Keep pets confined to your property or walk them on a leash.

To learn more about rabies or to obtain Rabies Awareness Week educational materials, including a PowerPoint presentation called “Rabies – What Kids Need to Know,” visit <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epi/dzee/rabies/awarenessweek.asp>.

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